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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000798

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL: U.S. CAN RESTORE GOL LEGITIMACY
VIA SLEIMAN; DOWNPLAYS ISRAEL'S PRISONER RELEASE

REF: BEIRUT 790

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Head of Kataeb (Phalange) party and former President Amine Gemayel believes the U.S. can restore legitimacy to the Lebanese government by shifting its endorsement from "the Siniora government" to a focus on newly-elected President Michel Sleiman and the vision outlined in his May 25 maiden speech. While Gemayel is pleased that the highest Maronite office has been filled, he hopes the U.S. will work to counter what he perceives as a strong Syrian influence over the President.

¶2. (C) Gemayel downplayed the importance of Israel's planned release of a convicted Hizballah spy, saying that Israel is solely concerned about its border security, rather than internal Lebanese politics. Eyeing the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Gemayel declared that March 14 has a limited time to prove its strength to the Lebanese, or it risks losing votes to the opposition. He stressed the importance of March 14, and in particular Christian, representation in ministries that directly impact the citizens' daily lives. End summary.

ENDORSE SLEIMAN!

¶3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met head of Kataeb (Phalange) party and former President Amine Gemayel and a party organizer at his party headquarters on May 29. He suggested the U.S. shift its language from supporting the "Siniora government" to endorsing the "Sleiman presidency." He reasoned that newly-elected President Michel Sleiman represents the one legitimate institution in Lebanon, and if the rest of the government is blocked, the importance of the presidency increases. "We need to return prestige to the presidency and to the Christians," he appealed.

¶4. (C) He further said that, while Sleiman's May 25 acceptance speech was very good and said the "right things," the U.S. should continue to regularly endorse Sleiman because he "straddles" the fence between Syria and Lebanon. Gemayel expressed his fear that "Syria already had a successful start in infiltrating the President." Therefore, the U.S. must push Sleiman as much as possible. He added that the

opposition's blocking third can block "everything!"

ISRAEL MOST CONCERNED
ABOUT SECURE BORDERS

15. (C) Downplaying the importance of the news that Israel will release Lebanese citizen and convicted Hizballah spy Nassim Nasser on June 1, Gemayel said that Israel's main goal is the security of its borders. Therefore, he derived, Israel is not at all concerned about the domestic politics in Lebanon, and will make deals with whoever can ensure its security, even if Hizballah is running the government. Gemayel wondered if Israel was returning this prisoner two years before completing his sentence as a measure of goodwill to Hizballah.

MARCH 14 NEEDS MOMENTUM
TO RETAIN SUPPORT

16. (C) Admitting that majority leader Saad Hariri was his preference for the next PM (although he cast his vote for Fouad Siniora along with the rest of March 14), Gemayel said that March 14 needs a strong leader who can influence the rank and file March 14 members, and counter extremism among the disillusioned Sunnis. He said that while the Tripoli politicians (MP Mosbah Ahdab and Public Works and Transportation Minister Mohammed Safadi) are still "fully March 14," the alliance runs the risk of losing these politicians if they do not believe March 14 has momentum.

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"We have until the end of spring (2009) parliamentary elections to give hope to the Lebanese. Otherwise, they will vote for March 8," he declared.

FORMING A GOVERNMENT
IS ROUND ONE

17. (C) In this race against Hizballah, Gemayel theorized, we are at the starting line. He stated with confidence that Hizballah will strike again, perhaps politically rather than militarily. Gemayel said that those in March 14 cannot confront Hizballah again, and must work on strengthening themselves. He suggested strategic cabinet positions in the service ministries (Health, Public Works, etc.) as one way to regain popular support for March 14. These ministries interact directly with the people, he noted.

18. (C) When the Charge inquired about his thoughts on the possibility of a prolonged caretaker cabinet, a possibility voiced yesterday by March 14 leader Samir Geagea, (Ref A), Gemayel smiled, exclaiming, "I invented this method of governing!" (Note: Gemayel employed creative techniques to preserve the presidential role in 1988 when his term was expiring and there was no agreement on his successor. End note.) He was not keen on this idea for an extended period of time, citing "allegiance" as the government's biggest problem. If the government's representatives have conflicting allegiances, he explained, it cannot function.

19. (C) While believing PM-designate Fouad Siniora should continue governing according to what is constitutionally possible, Gemayel stressed the need to form a cabinet quickly to pass urgent political, economic, and social measures. He added that the Christians need to be well-represented in the cabinet. Of the 15 Christians he hopes will be appointed ministers, Gemayel believes the seven or eight representing March 14 should be "solid Christians with grassroots support" (as opposed to technocrats like caretaker Finance Minister Jihad Azour and caretaker Economy Minister Sami Haddad).

NEED A DIFFERENT KIND
OF SUPPORT FROM U.S.

¶10. (C) Repeating his past sentiments that the U.S.'s statements of support during the recent May clashes were "inefficient," Gemayel hopes the U.S. will demonstrate to the Lebanese "somehow" that it is a formidable counterbalance to Syrian and Iranian influence. Uncertain how the U.S. can accomplish this, he cited UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and the Special Tribunal as two solid measures. On resolving Shebaa Farms, Gemayel called Shebaa a "pretext" for Hizballah, predicting that Hizballah will not agree to disarm itself if a solution is reached.

¶11. (C) Stressing that training and equipping the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), providing economic assistance, and facilitating the opening of a second airport, are essential and visible signs of support, Gemayel said more needs to be done.

SISON